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SUBJECT: DARFUR REBELS WON'T RUSH TO PEACE AT EXPENSE OF POLITICAL
AGENDA

Reftel: Khartoum 00267

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) The factions of the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) must re-unite across tribal lines before any negotiations can begin with the Sudanese Government, a commander allied with SLA/Abdulshafie told Poloff in El Fasher. Discussions among the field commanders allied with SLA/Abdulshafie, SLA/Unity, SLA/Abdulwahid, and the United Revolutionary Front (URF) are ongoing, according to the commander, and aim at building unification from the bottom up to pressure leaders like Abdulwahid al Nur to set aside their personal ambitions and cooperate with other factions to achieve their political goals vis-a-vis Khartoum. Any alliance with Arab militias is unlikely, the commander predicted, given these militias' shifting loyalties and attempts to renew a military pact with the Sudanese Government. End summary.

SLA Unification Before Peace

¶2. (SBU) Recognizing that their factionalism has weakened their position vis-a-vis the Sudanese Government, the factions of the SLA must unite in order to achieve their political goals, Abdullah Ismail, a commander affiliated with the SLA led by Ahmed Abdulshafie, told Poloff on March 6. While the movements are split by personal rivalries rather than over disagreements on the political agenda, Ismail claimed that there is universal recognition that any re-unification of the SLA across tribal lines (i.e. an agreement between Zaghawa and Fur rebel elements) is essential for achieving their political objectives. Until inter-movement and inter-tribal negotiations result in a united front to challenge Khartoum, negotiations will not be possible.

Unification from the Bottom Up

¶3. (SBU) According to Ismail, discussions among the field commanders allied with SLA/Abdulshafie, SLA/Unity, SLA/Abdulwahid, and the URF continue. "The problem is with the political leadership, not the fighters," he explained, suggesting that unification can be built from the bottom up to pressure leaders like Abdulwahid to set aside their personal ambitions and cooperate with other factions. The mid-ranking segments of the movements need time to complete their consultations, asserted Ismail. "If people (i.e. the top tier of rebel leadership) don't want to unify, no one--not the UN, not the AU, not the U.S.--can help," he said. "It's like someone who is ill and doesn't want to see the doctor." (Note: An NGO with close ties

to the rebel movements confirmed that intense "negotiations" are occurring between key rebel factions, including SLA/Abdulwahid and SLA/Unity. End note.)

Not in a Hurry

14. (SBU) Ismail predicted that international pressure on the movements to participate in a peace process would be ineffective. "We want to achieve our goals," he said, "and we're not in a hurry. We cannot create a weak structure that falls apart during negotiations." Though all sides are "fed up with fighting," the movements will not relent in their struggle to obtain political rights for the people of Darfur. "When we're strong, we can expand the fight outside Darfur" in order to gain concessions from Khartoum, Ismail threatened, mentioning Kordofan specifically.

Unification Conference in Darfur

15. (SBU) Asked how the international community could support the hoped-for unification efforts, Ismail responded that after the completion of consultations among the field commanders, the U.S. should press Khartoum to allow a conference of the SLA factions to occur in Darfur so that "five to six" leaders from each faction could finalize a unified political structure. Any meeting of SLA factions outside Darfur would exclude influential rebel representatives and be focused on the diaspora, which is detached from the reality on the ground, said Ismail. He also rejected the possibility of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) holding the conference in Southern Sudan, lamenting that many members of SLA/Abdulshafie were still stuck in Juba because the Sudanese

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Government will not grant the UN/AU flight clearances to return them to Darfur. Other factions are reticent to be in the same position. (Note: SLA/Abdulshafie has traditionally had the strongest ties to the SPLM among any of the SLA factions. End note.)

16. (SBU) Pressed to explain why such a leadership conference would differ from a similar effort held in Um Rai, North Darfur in January 2007, Ismail explained that the AU, which was responsible for airlifting rebel leaders to site, had initially neglected to transport key figures. The Sudanese military then later attacked the location, disrupting the discussions.

Force Versus Political Legitimacy

17. (SBU) Poloff noted that some of the militarily strong movements (which, like SLA/Unity, tend to be dominated by the Zaghawa tribe) believe they should hold claim to a greater number of leadership positions in a unified movement. The militarily weak but politically strong Fur factions, such as SLA/Abdulwahid, dispute this claim, which often derails unification discussion. Ismail dismissed this analysis, saying that military power has fluctuated throughout the conflict and should not be a determining factor. "No one can claim he is stronger than the others," he said. "One day you're strong; one day you're weak. Everything is possible under the sun. In 2003, the rebels took El Fasher with just 400 fighters. In 2004, the forces of Minni Minawi (who commanded the most powerful military force at that time and later became the sole--and now marginalized--signatory of the Darfur Peace Agreement) were destroyed in North Darfur and fled to (the Fur stronghold of) Jebel Marra to regroup. It's not a matter of force. It's a matter of political legitimacy in the towns." (Note: SLA/Abdulshafie, with which Ismail is affiliated, commands little military force and lacks political support even among Abdulshafie's Fur tribe. End note.)

Arab Militias Untrustworthy

18. (SBU) An alliance with Arab militias that have distanced themselves from the Sudanese Government are a dubious venture, said Ismail. During meetings in late 2007 with Mahariya militia leader Hamati, Ismail said that the SLA demanded that Hamati's forces attack Government areas in order to prove that "they're really fighting for the people of Darfur." These attacks did not materialize, and instead, Hamati is engaging in discussions with Khartoum to renew their military pact, alleged Ismail. (Note: Per Reftel, this information has been corroborated by three UN and NGO sources. End note.)

Comment

19. (SBU) Ismail's emphasis on SLA unification prior to negotiations with the Sudanese Government echoes comments widespread across all the factions of the SLA, including Abdulwahid's. The movements have little faith in the international community's ability to wrest political concessions from Khartoum and are therefore concentrating on reconsolidating a credible military threat to pressure the Government. While the UN-AU Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) deploys, the UN/AU mediation can support--though not interfere in--the inter-rebel dialogue and focus its efforts in Darfur. These dual processes may then lay the foundation for constructive negotiations over the next six to 12 months. End comment.

FERNANDEZ